

Parts of the moon

Selected haiku & senryu 1988-2007



John O'Connor

Other Poetry by John O'Connor:

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Citizen Of No Mean City. Christchurch: Concept Publishing, 1985.

Too Right Mate: The well-versed voter's satirical guide (with Bernard Gadd). Auckland: Hallard Press, 1996.

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Whistling In The Dark. Forthcoming.

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These haiku are selected from *A Particular Context* and *Whistling in the Dark*. My thanks to the editors of the periodicals, columns and anthologies in which most of them have previously appeared.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

John O'Connor is a Christchurch poet and critic.

He was co-winner of the open section of the New Zealand Poetry Society International Poetry Competition in 1998 and winner of both the open and haiku sections of the same competition in 2006. In 2000 his fifth book of poetry, *A Particular Context*, was voted one of the five best books of New Zealand poetry of the 1990s by members of the NZPS. He is an editor for Canterbury Poets Combined Presses, was co-founder of Sudden Valley Press and Poets Group, founding editor of the poetry magazine *plainwraps*, occasional editor of *Takahe* and *SPIN* magazines and of the NZPS annual anthology. Whilst largely published in New Zealand, his criticism has also appeared in Australia, Japan, the UK and the US. His poetry has been widely published and is represented in *Essential New Zealand Poems* and other anthologies. From the 1990s his haiku have been internationally anthologised and translated into eight languages. In 1997 he received an Honorary Diploma from the Croatian Haiku Association and in 2001 a Museum of Haiku Literature Award, Tokyo, for "best of issue" in *Frogpond International*, a special issue of the Haiku Society of America's periodical, *Frogpond*, featuring haiku selected from 52 countries and language communities.

He began writing poetry – including haiku – in the early-70s, concentrating mainly on free verse. Through the mid-70s/mid-80s he increased his understanding to the point of being able to write haiku such as these (revised from their first publications):

cricket —
beyond the mist a lake
& rushes

horse-fly —
the reservoir yellow &
green

but it wasn't until joining the HSA in the late-80s – the time from which this selection begins – that he began writing with a more developed understanding of the form. He was the first New Zealander to be widely published in US haiku journals. Over recent years however his poetic focus has been elsewhere – since the mid-90s he has been uninvolved in the international haiku community and less involved with NZ haiku. He intends returning to the serious study of haiku in the future.

mountain-side —
the train climbs its own
sound

light rain —
the cat brings in
the scent of blue gums

wedding ring worn thin
she kneads dough
in autumn sunlight

quatrain on a gravestone
the last rhyme
mossed out

old woman
waiting
for swallows

christmas spirit —
three bums share a bottle
on the shelter step

holding them
together
the south wind

against dark —
the blind man's cane
on the crossing

summer valley —
the derelict farm-house
so cold inside

attic dust
finding my mother's
footsteps

tuning his mandoline
my father's gnarled fingers
listening

still night —
far off a train
rumbles through it

fires on the sand —
the net-fishermen call
to the flames

midsummer sky
on all
the postcards

in
the empty billboard frame
the whole mountain

upland track —
the sound of my boots
grows heavy

honours board —
the old wino
reads his name

call box —
through the smashed pane
a chill wind

I walk past
the bag lady's
breath

the heat —
no-one
on this country road

inside
the derelict house —
chrysanthemums

3.20 am
the hooker stares
down the empty street

cutting the first grey
from my beard
before leaving

track through the dunes
skirts round the skeleton
of something

late dawn —
the ridge of the mountain
glows

circus dwarf —
so high above his hand
the red balloon

past the mannikin
the girl with the same
pout

the pines
all bending north

the cold sun —
a pebble casts
its long shadow

the billboard
slaps up just another
star

grasshopper
swaying in
the autumn sun

down the valley;
headlight
of the freighter

early spring —
buttoning unbuttoning
my jacket

scattered
across water — parts
of the sun

parlour window a flicker of lace

summer trickle
through scattered
mountain pines

billboard . . .
the lingerie girl smiling
through the snow

nothing special the wind shifts a cloud

caff sideboard —
a plastic blossom
drooping in the sun

opening the page —
a blue feather
slips out

breakers
turning the light
over

after the parade
the clown washes off
his smile

spring tide —
fishing boats face
every which way

the civic clock-face —
a cloud-shadow
moves across it

autumn sharpness —
woodsmoke
through the dark

the heat —
a poster flaps
by an air-vent

half light
& down the canyon
a pebble falls

Aroona —
of trees hills the shape

night train —
the lit carriages
empty

garage sale —
in the dressing-table mirror
a stranger's face

by the piecart
formal
introductions

out of a ute a thug
checks his hair
in a darkened window

office block —
a light on the first floor
goes out

clown-face balloon
drifts across
the thunderhead

winter —
on the edge of the bush
a feral cat hunkers down

saloon —
a barman re-opens
The Evening Star

streetwalker
reapplying her lipstick
in the lit doorway

shelter —
a bag lady reads
The New Yorker

siren —
the foot of the valley fills
with light

wind rising & all the moon

dusk —
up to my ears
in birdsong

for Jim Kacian

path
to the outhouse —
wild roses

ageing streetwalker —
only one out
in the cold

parking lot —
a security light
flicks on

his bicycle on hers —
path
by the meadow

a red balloon drifts across mirrorglass

on the street . . .
a neighbour I haven't met
avoids eye contact

waiting for a gap
in the traffic:
my neighbour's old dog

obit page —
the face of an old friend
stares out

homeless —
he checks the curb
for butts

“open home” —
in the master bedroom
a stranger’s scent

11 pm —
a waitress checks her watch
in the empty caff

above the surface
egret
drawing the mountains in

shag on a wharf pile
opens its wings —
spring twilight

on the back of a truck
— April mist

stray cat
so thin
the autumn wind

last train exits —
the lights on the platform
dim

a barman
dries a glass
at closing time

mildly offended by
the well dressed
scarecrow

a street-lamp
flickers —
the chill

border crossing —
the guard's smileless
smile

pine —
holding the raindrops
up

lovers' reunion —
two Zimmer frames
by the park bench

mountain hut
becoming part
of the mountain

midnight —
moonlight sits
on a cab rank

the creak in the wood pigeon's flight

by the curb
a broken bottle —
spring rain

boarding house porch —
a lone male
lights up

dusk —
a hawk rises
from a fence post

destitute . . .
an old woman checks out
a BMW

morning mist
the tin shed
comes & goes

crossing —
the barrier arms come down
at sunset

theatre facade —
a drop of rain
from the gargoyle's nose

street-kids the chill

for company
I take
the empty track

before the execution . . .
a guard checks
his tie

twilight —
the slow gliding flight
of hawk

light
blue
light

outside the barber shop
a cutting
wind

rest home —
Mrs Atkins opens
a Mills & Boon

empty carousel —
the ticket booth attendant
combs his hair


snowmelt —
the holes in the spouting
help out

'hi' / high
the young hooker 😊s
at everyone

waxeye
on a twig
without breaking it

_____+ing fatality —
the car radio
still on

from post to post morepork morepork

the 
*a red balloon above
the 'gypsy fair'*


roadkill —
a black-back waits
on the traffic

l
 l l o
 a l l o o
 b a l l o o n
 a l l o o
 l l o
 l

moon backlit pines

on the mirror . . . age spots

streetlightssweet'artsstreetarts, pimps

joining the ducks —
autumn 

+roads
road+

window —



at two o'clock

Base

4) Scott


1) the




3) midnight

sun

2) brilliant

a  scribes an arc
of blue

riveroflightriveroflightsriveroflight

halloween —
the carousel
goes 



all out of haiku —
just a high wind
& spring sunlight

Appendix & Notes

TECHNOLOGY & VERSE


When struggling with the latest technology we can console ourselves with the thought that the typewriter – once the `*!@##$%^` technology itself – almost certainly influenced the development of (modern) free verse. To see how, try working up your drafts by hand.

Over the years other technologies have also played their parts – from Mayakovsky and Pound, to Olson and Zukofsky, to Middleton and Paterson. (From musical notations to double margins.)

Which brings us – quickly (by word limit) – to the computer. We've all read something like:

I ♥ NY

A kind of WMD on language purists. But has it been used on poetry? Though I've hunted around in the most stupid possible way, interviewed the usual suspects etc, I've come up with zilch, to date. Some have tried the red herring of text-messaging – to get me off their backs. But I'm not talking about *that* particular use of computer-like technology – “**No NO!** The technique I'm sniffing out,” I explain politely, “is the use of *single computer graphics* (symbols) *that can be read as words!*” – as above.

Strongest lead so far is some loose ♡ (which, as we know, ) in J A Cuddon's *Literary Terms and Literary Theory*: “semiotic poetry (which uses symbols)”, under the heading Concrete Poetry. No examples (plans) given, no poets (terrorists) mentioned.

Does it matter? **No**, except as a point of curiosity; for it's obvious that the first poets beyond the oral traditions must have been using hieroglyphs – the same technique – simply as their way of writing. Apart from that it will presumably have been used much more recently. (If you have information please let me know.)

Meantime I'll refer to “graphic-words”; “hieroglyphs” is *sooooo* gay – and just a little old hat. They're typically single, or near to single, computer graphics that stand for alphabet-words. Eg, the first one above stands for “love” (rather than “heart”, which it literally is). When writing in (or about) poetry one necessarily relies on reader intelligence, creativity and open-mindedness – at least as much as when writing for the average T-shirt.

The question isn't then, "Has the technique been used before?", but "Why use it at all?" Let's see – in practice. I'll use haiku for space, but it can be used in any senses-based part of any poem. Example 1:


a fishing boat rises / falls

Using mainly graphic-words it becomes:



The graphics give the immediacy of *single* objects/activities or actions (nouns or verbs) well drawn. Whereas the first version (made of the more flexible/adaptive alphabet-words) takes us to images selected/created from relatively general concepts – a fishing boat of some type, and an idea of its movement (forward, or undulating whilst at anchor) – the second more concisely/swiftly and precisely/concretely gives us the activity, the particular type of boat (in outline) and a clearer idea of its movements. (It's really an interpretation – a more specific reading – of the alphabet-word haiku.)

From these *enhanced particulars* we get greater attraction between the graphic-words and the (spontaneously created) elements and actions surrounding and continuing from them: the wind-blown, cawing gulls; the spindrift; the bow-wave; the salt sting etc. I.e, the increased inevitability (clarity and force) of the graphic-words acts as a more solid/complete platform for reader involvement *beyond* the literal poem (than do alphabet-words which generally expend more reader-input on the particularisation of images) the graphic-word reader-input connecting out *more* – and more spontaneously – to the world. That's how we try for (and arguably what we ultimately mean by) "universality"; a reader-assisted process that of course (rather than paradoxically) differs *somewhat* from reader to reader. Additionally, there's an aspect of "serious play" involved here that can be a useful distancing device in various types of verse.

Before finishing, let us be clear that *complex* graphics (excepting conventional symbols as complex graphics) are not graphic-word poems – or parts of them. This: , eg, is not a poem made up of graphic-words simply because we don't know where to start reading (or speaking) it. Do we start with tree, river, clear sky or dark ground – and how to continue? In contrast, a poem has a *set* order (very occasionally orders) of words – be they alphabet- or graphic-words.

Like alphabet-words, graphic-words can have multiple meanings and suggestions but – and this answers the question above – they *sometimes* have clear advantages over alphabet-words in the particularity and (consequent) immediacy they give to the sensory imagery so important to poetry.

First published (with additional examples) in a fine line, March 2007

NOTES

18:4 After Hans Heysen's *The Three Sisters of Aroona*, 1927.

32:4 Waxeye (also tauhou, ringeye, silvereve etc). Sometimes white-eye in Australia.

32–36 By way of distinguishing types, it's perhaps worth noting that as well as the usual word haiku these pages also present graphic, keystroke, circle* and concrete examples.

33:2 Morepork: NZ owl, colloquially known as the morepork for its repeated call.

33:4 Black-back: properly, a black-backed gull.

*35:4 Circle haiku. So named because the inner edges of the words/numerals touch (at one point each) the circumference of an invisible circle. This example has starting points for four clockwise readings.

Reviewers' comments on O'Connor's previous work:

"His haiku ... are strikingly effective."

FIONA KIDMAN, *NZ Listener*

"... New Zealand's pioneering haiku poets, including Ruth Dallas, Rupert Glover, Howard Dengate and John O'Connor."

WALLY SWIST, *Modern Haiku* (US)

"At its best haiku can be hauntingly evocative as in John O'Connor's *attic dust / finding my mother's / footsteps*."

JAMES NORCLIFFE, *Christchurch Star*

"This also has a lightness to it that belies its depth: *attic dust*..."

CHARLOTTE WRIGHTSON, *Manawa* (NZ)

"... haiku, a form of which he is a master."

TOM WESTON, *The Press* (NZ)

"As always, O'Connor's haiku say the most with the least."

PAUL MILLAR, *Kite* (NZ)

"There can be no doubt that O'Connor is one of the best New Zealand practitioners – arguably *the best*."

KATE O'NEILL, *JAAM* (NZ)

"There's a fine collection of haiku and senryu too; indeed O'Connor is acknowledged internationally for his work in these and related forms."

JOHN KNIGHT, *Social Alternatives* (Aust)

"Christchurch poets have for many years taken a serious interest in haiku and related forms. None has taken a more sustained interest, nor produced more poems of consistently high standard, than John O'Connor. His poems have been widely published in New Zealand and overseas and ... he has done much to foster interest and quality in these forms."

CYRIL CHILDS, *Listening to the Rain* (NZ)

"The haiku/tanka scene in New Zealand owes a lot of its character to him."

TONY BEYER, *Takahe* (NZ)





Reading at the 2nd Wellington International Poetry
Festival, October 2004

Christchurch poet, editor, critic, and winner of the open and haiku sections of the 2006 New Zealand Poetry Society International Poetry Competition, John O'Connor is arguably one of New Zealand's finest contemporary poets. Acknowledged internationally for his work in haiku, senryu and related forms, his haiku have been anthologised and published in eight languages. With this selection, drawn from the best of his published and unpublished work, the specificity of voice and images demonstrate O'Connor's stature as haiku master with a particular antipodean sense of season and place. For those who seek to push the boundaries of the craft or to return to the origins of the written form in symbols and hieroglyphs, O'Connor's brief and concluding essay, 'Technology and Verse', discusses the application of graphic words (computer graphics) in haiku, as evidenced in some of the haiku herein. And for those who know and appreciate the 'haiku moment', the insights and apprehensions will linger long after the book is closed.

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